

Courtesy Counts: Rudeness Wrecks Working Relationships

(excerpted from *Get Along with Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere--8 Keys to Creating Enduring Connections* by Sandra Strauss and Arnold Sanow, Nautilus Communications, 2003)

Workplace aggression is on the rise according to a number of research studies, leaving employees feeling angry, irritated, and disrespected, and in chronic cases can lead to anxiety and depression. Rude behavior at work, and failing to demonstrate concern and regard for others, is a problem for many organizations; it hurts productivity, job commitment, job retention, morale, and working relationships, not to mention the health and well-being of employees.



A survey conducted by Public Agenda, called *Aggravating Circumstances—A Status Report on Rudeness in America*, revealed that more than one-third of the 2,013 people questioned thought about moving to some kinder, gentler place! Research from the University of Michigan revealed that 71 percent of 1,100 workers had experienced condescending remarks or other rude behavior at work over a five-year period. Civility matters and good working relationships are threatened without respect and courtesy in place.

A University of North Carolina (UNC) study called *Workplace Incivility: The Target's Eye View* surveyed 1,400 workers and revealed that both men and women equally reported being targets of discourteous and insensitive behavior. The majority of the instigators were men, and they were three times more likely to be of higher rank than their targets:

52 percent said they lost work time worrying about the incidents of rudeness

46 percent considered changing jobs (12 percent actually did quit)

37 percent reported that they felt less committed to their company

22 percent deliberately cut back their efforts

In another UNC study, 1,601 respondents were asked whether they believed rudeness, backstabbing, poor communication, and incivility existed in the workplace. Eighty-nine percent said “yes.” The same group was asked whether they themselves were uncivil, rude, negative, or talked behind others’ backs:

99% said “no.” Obviously, this shows how people disconnect their own negative behavior as compared to others. Either people don’t acknowledge or admit their rude behavior, or they are clueless.

What do you expect?

One thing is clear--we bring our list of expectations into our relationships, particularly in reference to how others treat us. Others may have different rules or expectations. When our colleagues’ behavior is courteous and congruent

with our own, it's a match-up of manners. However, if they're not in alignment, for instance someone ignores customary greeting or parting statements (such as "Hello!" "Good morning!" or "Good-bye"), we may get confused, angry, or even outraged. We expect an exchange of these traditional social graces; they acknowledge our very presence. We may interpret their absence as disrespectful, wondering why we've been overlooked or made to feel invisible.

For instance, if we pass someone in the hall and are not acknowledged by them, our brain might kick into the "wonder" gear: "*Why wouldn't he say 'hello'? What's wrong with him? Is he really that busy to just ignore me? What nerve! Did I do something wrong? Was it something I said earlier? Am I invisible?*" In reality, the person might just be absorbed in faraway thoughts; however, even such little things left unspoken can trigger wild imaginings, big misunderstandings, and a loss of respect.

While rudeness is sometimes unintentional, other times it's not so innocent, as people purposely take aim against others with malice. They have agendas of their own and don't care how their cruel behavior affects their colleagues. In extreme cases of persistent intimidation, victims endure a reign of terror. As their encounters with uncivil behavior rises, especially in reference to chronic insulting, humiliating or bullying behavior, so do their symptoms of anxiety and depression; those who don't do or say anything about their mistreatment have the worst mental health. Yet, those who find themselves in unreceptive environments for addressing the problem, may experience retaliation, either work-related (given less-favorable duties, denied promotions) or social ostracism.

Reining in Rudeness

Executives have the responsibility of creating a culture of civility, but it's everyone's responsibility to treat others with respect. Some executives and managers are simply baffled by what they can or should do to stop the behavior. If you serve in a leadership position, emphasize the need for respect and courtesy in all communications with colleagues and customers. Establish written policies against abuse and enforce them, letting employees know that disrespectful behavior of any type will not be tolerated. Avoid speaking disparagingly to staff, which sets a standard of acceptable behavior for lower-level supervisors to imitate. Above all, model respectful behavior in all your interactions to show employees that extending respect is always a top priority. ©2003 Sandra Strauss and Arnold Sanow

Reader Note: In their book, *Get Along with Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere--8 Keys to Creating Enduring Connections*, Sandra Strauss and Arnold Sanow detail the actions and attitudes that build and sustain quality relationships for business and beyond.

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